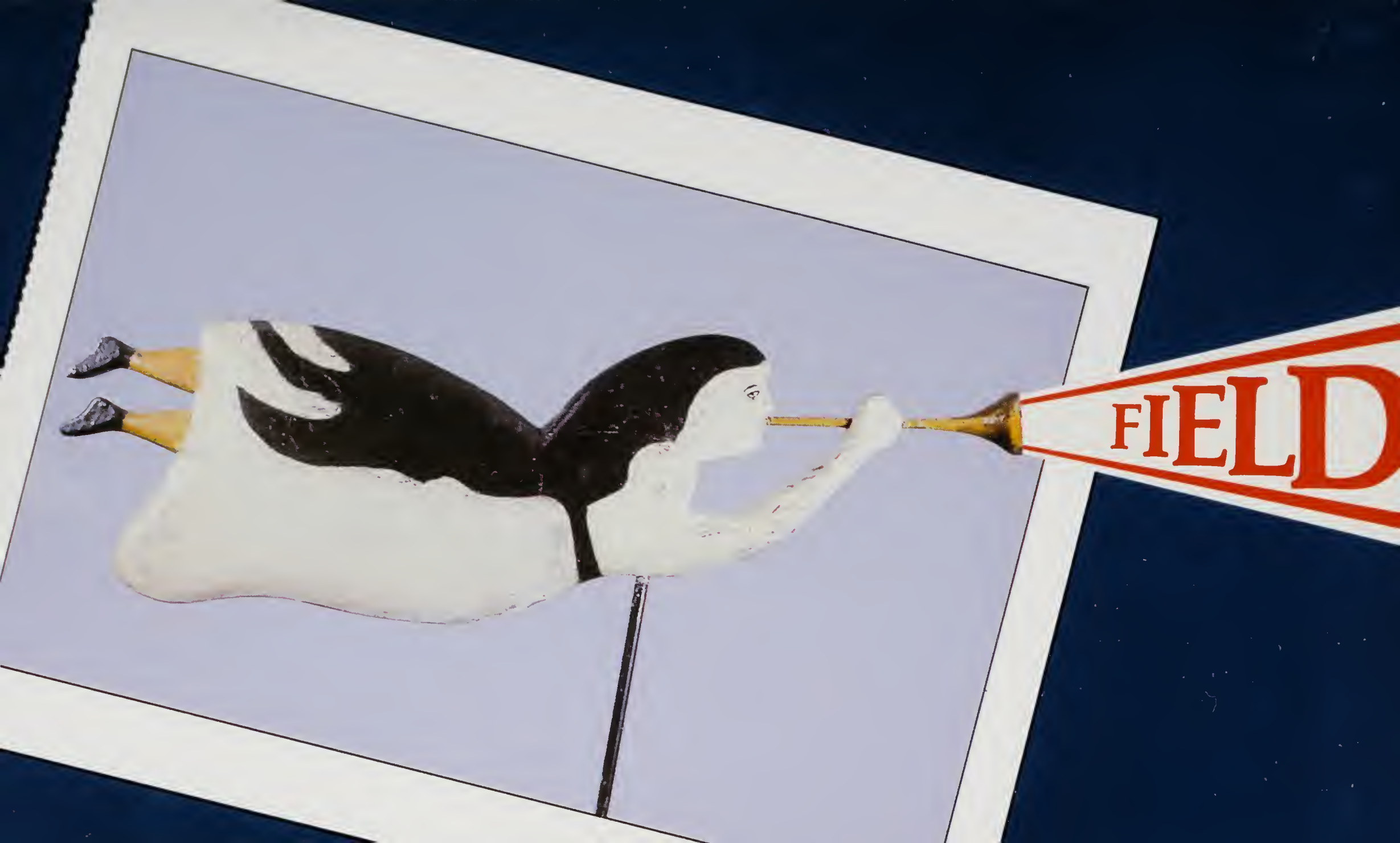
FIELD

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EMILY DICKINSON

A *FIELD* SYMPOSIUM

EMILY DICKINSON: A *FIELD* SYMPOSIUM

If you are a working American poet, or in close touch with the current state of American letters, you do not have to be told how fully and variously Emily Dickinson is with us, among us, informing our understanding of our language, our culture, our possibilities of poetic expression and poetic form. It would be naive to explain such obvious facts here. Better to let the seven participants, by means of their six essays and one poem — we allowed Charles Simic the heresy of a response that departs from our standard format, just this once — try to allow the poet to speak for herself, through them, to the issue of the many ways in which she moves among us and gives us a subtler and more acute understanding of who we are and where we are and what some of it might mean.

Will there really be a "Morning"?
Is there such a thing as "Day"?
Could I see it from the mountains
If I were as tall as they?

Has it feet like Water lilies?
Has it feathers like a Bird?
Is it brought from famous countries
Of which I have never heard?

Oh some Scholar! Oh some Sailor!
Oh some Wise Man from the skies!
Please to tell a little Pilgrim
Where the place called "Morning" lies!

QUESTIONING THE PILGRIM

It was Emily Dickinson who taught me to love questions more than answers the summer I turned sixteen and found myself on the cusp of the question that pricks all travelers who hear the gates clang shut on the gardens of childhood: *what will become of me*? School was out, I stopped wearing my watch and set myself the task of memorizing a poem a day, an ambition which soon shrank to a poem a week. I chose the poems from two books I loved and trusted. One was a beat-up copy of the songs from Shakespeare's plays. The other was a Modern Library edition of Emily Dickinson's selected poems.

"Will there really be a 'Morning'?" was the first poem I memorized, and what attracted me was its apparent lack of subject. When I puzzled over the question, What is the poem about?, I could only answer by quoting the poem itself. Yet what could be more artless? There was nothing here I couldn't actually say if I were a traveler asking directions.

But of course I, for whom morning was a time and not a place, wouldn't ask those questions. Where was the speaker and what circumstances had kept her in the dark about so simple a matter? Under that guileless opening question, wasn't the speaker asking a more urgent one? The only way into the poem was the method of the poem itself: questions leading to questions, which changed and refined themselves as I read more of Dickinson's poetry and discovered she was a riddle-maker, and therefore a poet after my own heart.

Long before I could recognize a metaphor, I loved riddles for giving me what I have always valued in poetry: a way of looking at the commonplace in an uncommon way. The riddle Dickinson wrote to accompany the gift of a a cocoon to her young nephew requires no answer, only the reader's close scrutiny of her subject through a catalogue of metaphors:

> Drab Habitation of Whom?
> Tabernacle or Tomb —
> Or Dome of Worm —

Or Porch of Gnome —
Or some Elf's Catacomb?

The poems of Dickinson's that have taught me the most are those in which she does not name her subject, though every metaphor reveals it and every verb in her succinct narratives dramatizes it. The following two stanzas (the first and last in a five-stanza poem) are rooted in the reticence of riddles, but I know of no riddle about snow that surprises the reader the way Dickinson does throughout this poem.

It sifts from Leaden Sieves —
It powders all the Wood.
It fills with Alabaster Wool
The Wrinkles of the Road —

. . . . . .

It Ruffles Wrists of Posts
As Ankles of a Queen —
Then stills its Artisans — like Ghosts—
Denying they have been —

Behind the face of the familiar lies the deeper question: *who are you*? Many years after I committed "Will there ever be a 'Morning'?" to memory, I discovered a poem similar in form, yet different in voice, that had not snagged my attention that summer, though I must surely have read it. This poem, too, consists of questions, but their context is narrative and therefore more specific — and more sinister.

What Inn is this
Where for the night
Peculiar Traveller comes?
Who is the Landlord?
Where the maids?
Behold, what curious rooms!

No ruddy fires on the hearth —
No brimming Tankards flow —

Necromancer! Landlord!
Who are these below?

A traveler who does not know she is moving from life to death looks at the grave and sees an inn — and an ill-furnished one at that. Because an inn is what travelers might expect to see, her questions describe not what is, but what is not. Only in the ninth line does she call her landlord by the name that suits him, acknowledging that he works his wonders by communicating with the dead. But she does not count herself among them. The final question shows the speaker has been taken by surprise and tricked by her own ignorance. She has not yet surmised that when death kindly stopped for her, the destination was eternity.

In a letter written fifteen years before she died, Dickinson's questions suggest she has not only found the place where morning lies, she is one of its keepers: "Dare you dwell in the East where we dwell? Are you afraid of the sun? — When you hear the new violet sucking her way among the sods, shall you be *resolute*? All we are *strangers* — dear — The world is not acquainted with us, because we are not acquainted with her. And pilgrims!"*

*From a letter to Catherine Scott Turner (Anthon), written about March, 1859. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Harvard University Press, 1958), vol. II, p. 349.

AMBIGUITY'S WEDDING

after E. D.

Bride of Awe, all that's left for us
Are vestiges of a feast table,
Levitating champagne glasses
In the hands of the erased millions.

Mr. So and So, the bridegroom
Of absent looks, lost looks,
The pale reporter from the awful doors
Before identity was leased

At night's delicious close,
A few denizens of insignificance about,
The spider at his trade,
The print of his vermilion foot.

A faded boy in sallow clothes
Badly smudged, his shadow on the wall
Still visible, a wintry shadow
Quieter than sleep.

Soul, take thy risk,
There where your words and thoughts
Come to a stop,
Abbreviate me thus, in marriage.

I tie my hat — I crease my Shawl —
Life's little duties do — precisely —
As the very least
Were infinite — to me —

I put new Blossoms in the Glass —
And throw the old — away —
I push a petal from my Gown
That anchored there — I weigh
The time 'twill be till six o'clock
I have so much to do —
And yet — Existence — some way back —
Stopped — struck — my ticking — through —
We cannot put Ourself away
As a completed Man
Or Woman — When the Errand's done
We came to Flesh — upon —
There may be — Miles on Miles of Naught —
Of Action — sicker far —
To simulate — is stinging work —
To cover what we are
From Science — and from Surgery —
Too Telescopic Eyes
To bear on us unshaded —
For their — sake — not for Ours —
'Twould start them —
We — could tremble —
But since we got a Bomb —
And held it in our Bosom —
Nay — Hold it — it is calm —

Therefore — we do life's labor —
Though life's Reward — be done —
With scrupulous exactness —
To hold our Senses — on —

STINGING WORK

Perhaps it's the portrait. That solemn, rather plain photograph of the young woman in the dark dress, reprinted in countless critical and biographical studies, is the one physical link most of us have to the poet. Formally posed so as not to blur the daguerreotype, she gazes out at the camera, nearly expressionless, giving very little away. Along with the mythology of the spinster in the white dress, the recluse in her father's garret, the cookies in the basket, the portrait allows us to project our own version of who Dickinson was and what she means. Even once we've set aside the most patently false images — the greeting-card Dickinson, the lovelorn Dickinson, the one who was so hapless at punctuation that she needed to be corrected — there remains the enormous riddle of seeing beyond the images to the self they teasingly refuse to locate.

Riddles were of course deeply congenial to Dickinson, and comprise a central strategy of many of the poems. There are the poems such as "It sifts from Leaden Sieves" (#311) and "I like to see it lap the Miles" (#585), which leave it to the reader to puzzle out the "it" ("snow" and "a train," respectively). More challenging are poems that also refuse to specify the "it," but which, we gradually recognize, *have* no single, precisely identifiable referent. A poem like the exuberantly Gothic " 'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch" (#414) may *look* like a riddle poem, but its power depends on the reader's eventual realization that the simile points to nothing specific beyond itself; the speaker refers to a psychological state so complex and terrifying that she cannot name or know it except indirectly, by analogy. I sometimes think of the self in Dickinson's work as represented in much the same way: elusive, protean, and finally unknowable. In the work taken as a whole, and sometimes within an individual poem, Dickinson can seem at once intensely, self-flayingly personal and thrillingly, acrobatically self-creating, making herself over into a boy, a corpse, a "wife." This is one of the most daunting challenges of the work. It is also, of course, one of its greatest rewards.

What does all this have to do with the poem I've singled out? At first glance, anyway, "I tie my hat — I crease my Shawl" seems to confirm the persona we read in the photograph. Simple, modest, scrupulous: the diction of the opening appears to define her as exactly as the activities she describes. What sort of person actually takes the trouble to crease a shawl? Well, one for whom such trivial, even banal details "do" — meaning "suffice." Hers is a life lived within narrow horizons, like Jane Austen's "little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labour." Despite the air of calm and habituated self-sufficiency, there's a hint of unrest in that "As" that starts the third line; here it means "as if" — by implication, the speaker recognizes the actual chasm between the "little duties" of her own life and the infinite beyond, even though the *tone*, like the gaze in the photograph, says nothing overtly.

The beginning of the long central stanza returns with determination to the mundane, yet the complacency of the portrait soon falters. She moves from the familiar task of replacing faded flowers with fresh ones, to a much odder gesture: "I push a petal from my Gown / That anchored there" expresses considerable weight, as though she scarcely has the energy or even the will to "push" away the petal. The little pun that gets her from "anchor" to "weigh" serves also to emphasize how heavily time weighs on her. Despite all the emphasis on activity, this is clearly a life which seems like suspended animation, consisting of long stretches of time in which one watches a petal fall on one's dress and then summons the effort to push it away. Read in this way, the commonplace "I have so much to do" becomes deeply poignant, desperately evoking housework as wish-fulfillment.

Even if we've been alert to the underlying ironies — and I suspect most readers are not, on first encountering the poem — what follows comes as a real shock. In mid-quatrain, the speaker rips off the mask and confronts the existential crisis directly, in so many words. The narrative widens disconcertingly suddenly to become the metaphysical:

And yet — Existence — some way back —
Stopped — struck — my ticking — through —

What may have seemed oblivious self-deception is revealed as wholly deliberate stratagem. This couplet, by the way, is a wonderful example of the effect of Dickinson's unorthodox punctuation. The voice halts, stutters, as the speaker struggles to find language adequate to her experience, just as the reader must struggle to read the syntax coherently. The notion that existence itself has "stopped" at some indeterminate point is fairly clear, especially if we are familiar with Dickinson's other death-in-life poems. And "my ticking — through" seems to echo other poems in which the debilitated self is figured as a stopped clock (e.g., "A Clock stopped — / Not the Mantel's" [#287]). But "struck" points both backward to "stopped" and forward (as in "struck . . . through," as though she's been physically pierced by existence), an effect that more regularized punctuation simply couldn't achieve.

At this point the personal pronouns shift from singular to plural, throwing the net of implication over the reader; what seemed the experience of an isolated and rather pathetic individual becomes an icy rendering of the human condition. The voice takes on a note of resolution, even revelation, though the theology evoked here promises no redemption, only suffering:

We cannot put Ourself away
As a completed Man
Or Woman — When the Errand's done
We came to Flesh — upon —
There may be — Miles on Miles of Naught —
Of Action — sicker far.

Has any twentieth-century writer taken this idea any farther? Even if the putting-away of the self for which she longs isn't literally suicide, the image of existence as "Miles on Miles of Naught" and the notion of action as simply a kind of pathology anticipate the work of, say, Beckett to a striking degree. And yet I would argue that, as in Beckett, the confrontation with pain here embodies not simply a masochistic impulse, but also a facing-up

to experience that is bracing, even exhilarating. That impulse is defined more precisely in what follows:

> To simulate — is stinging work —
> To cover what we are
> From Science — and from Surgery —
> Too Telescopic Eyes
> To bear on us unshaded.

The act of simulation, of putting on the face in the portrait, is here defined not as play but as itself painful; the "little duties" which at the beginning of the poem seemed to afford such pleasure — or at least comfort — are acknowledged as "stinging work." They are necessary protection from the even greater threat of vulnerability, which is presented metaphorically as the result of invasive technology: the microscope, the scalpel, the telescope of prying eyes bearing down "unshaded." The voice now is at its most neurotic, as paranoid about the menace of other people as Dickinson ever got.

Yet here the poem takes its final and, I think, most surprising turn. The threat, she tells us, is not finally to oneself; rather, we disguise what we are from others "for their — sake — not for Ours." For others to be forced to face the naked truth about us would be too disruptive: " 'twould start them." The stanza turns inside out, presenting the gestures of concealment not as cowardice but as a sort of heroism. "We — could tremble," she tells us, "But since we got a Bomb — / And held it in our Bosom. . . ." It's a powerful, multilayered metaphor; as in Conrad's terrorist fantasia *The Secret Agent*, the one who carries the bomb is both in mortal danger and possessed of enormous power. And in a wonderful moment, the poem enacts *our* reaction to this startling and volatile image: "Nay — Hold it," she exclaims, as though we'd nearly dropped that bomb. "It is calm": the explosiveness and the ennui, inside and outside, are held in perfect symbiotic suspension.

After a tiny pause for breath, the poem sums up in a quatrain neat as a sampler; only because we've had the self-revelation can we intuit the terrible cost implicit in that neatness. The gap between the meaning of "*do* [perform] life's labor" and "life's Re-

ward — be *done* [finished]" is indeed infinite. Once we've had a glimpse of the bomb carried around as part of the daily routine, the scrupulous exactness necessary "to hold our Senses — on" seems less than simply metaphorical. And yet, as I've said, the poem is not merely an expression of pain. As in many of Dickinson's poems about concealment, there's the irony that it is in fact a self-portrait, a deliberate gesture of revelation. One of the experiences the poem evokes is that of being in the closet; reading the poem, forced to confront the implications of the gaze, we witness Dickinson's coming out.

640

I cannot live with You —
It would be Life —
And Life is over there —
Behind the Shelf

The Sexton keeps the Key to —
Putting up
Our Life — His Porcelain —
Like a Cup —

Discarded of the Housewife —
Quaint — or Broke —
A newer Sevres pleases —
Old Ones crack —

I could not die — with You —
For One must wait
To shut the Other's Gaze down —
You — could not —

And I — Could I stand by
And see You — freeze —
Without my Right of Frost —
Death's privilege?

Nor could I rise — with You —
Because Your Face
Would put out Jesus' —
That New Grace

Glow plain — and foreign
On my homesick Eye —
Except that You than He
Shone closer by —

They'd judge Us — How —
For You — served Heaven — You know,
Or sought to —
I could not —

Because You saturated Sight —
And I had no more Eyes
For sordid excellence
As Paradise

And were You lost, I would be —
Though My Name
Rang loudest
On the Heavenly fame —

And were You — saved —
And I — condemned to be
Where You were not —
That self — were Hell to Me —

So We must meet apart —
You there — I — here —
With just the Door ajar
That Oceans are — and Prayer —
And that White Sustenance —
Despair —

DOORS AJAR

"Tell all the truth but tell it slant," like the slant of light on winter afternoons. Angles of vision, angles of light, angles of insight: Emily Dickinson is the master of indirection, implication, rich ambiguity; and her poems are the mastery of — to quote Keats, one of her heroes — loading every rift with ore. We think of her symmetrical brilliance, in which the lines and rhymes balance the silences as perfectly as "syllable from sound" and the epigrams of thought act out their meanings "as imperceptibly as grief" as they speak to us at just the moment, it seems, of their inscription. I can think of no other poet who seems so imperatively to speak and write at once (see the *Letters*), to "tell all" yet understate at the same time. Her most famous poems — #s 258, 280, 465, 712, etc.—vary only slightly the hymnal quatrains of her obsessive music and vary no more than a few lines from her happy twenty. But when I think of Dickinson's exponential power I think of those poems that frustrate her perfections and worry her formalities to something closer to the nerve of the experience, where the angles and slantings are more severe and exposed, where the duration is extended, and where the emotion meets its edge, as in her longest poem, #640.

"I cannot live with you" is fifty lines of tight quatrains, in which not only the trimeter/dimeter base of the rhythm widely varies but the 2/4 rhymes range from pure to slant to not at all (stanza eight). The length of the poem has a lot to do with this "opening" of the form, just as the abbreviation of the line (compared to her standard tetrameter/trimeter) quickens the pace of the sentences down the page. Dickinson obviously has a deal on her mind; you feel the pressure of what it is at every turn and image — at every angle and slanting. And the longer the poem goes the quicker (and more densely) it seems to move, acquiring specific gravity and momentum as it accumulates its dramatic information. This is one of Dickinson's most personal poems — if that is a fair term for the excruciating reticence she brings to bear on all of her material, a reticence she struggles with in this poem as she tries on one analogy (strategy) after another, trying, it

seems at first, to say enough, to find what will articulate the apparent contradiction that "I cannot live with you — / It would be Life."

There is, of course, a plotted structure to what she is working out — a cause-and-effect sequence of comparisons, figures, and conflict (the conflict *is* the passion here) — particularly since one cannot write fifty lines of quatrains. The final stanza adds, or discovers, the two more lines ("And that White Sustenance — /Despair —") that in themselves summarize the way open closure operates as a principle throughout the poem. The intensity of her intensely private experience is such that the poet cannot hold the form to shape—nor clearly does she want to—and she cannot hold it back. The intensity increases the longer she sustains her "inadequacy." This is angular form at its best, slanting as needs be in order to test the emotion against the images of the thought. And by the time we arrive at the single theme-haunted pure and impure rhymes of the final, elongated moment of the poem, "there-here-Door-ajar-are-Prayer-Despair" add up, in their little space, to something just short of an explosion.

If I had to choose a Rosetta-stone word to serve as a signature for the poem as a whole it would have to be one of Dickinson's favorites, "ajar," which suggests dissonance (jarring) as much as partialness (part-opened), discordance (grating) as much as variance (unclosed). "Ajar" speaks naturally to the metrical outline of the poem's music (disharmony) but also to the internal dissonance of its syntax where the speed of disclosure ("For One must wait/To shut the Other's Gaze down — /You — could not —") and complexity ("That New Grace//Glow plain — and foreign/On my homesick Eye — /Except that You than He/Shone closer by —") become so elliptical as to sound almost like code. By stanza eight, the opposition and parsing out of the "Us" has become so squeezed — "They-Us-You-You-I" — that its passage alone narrows the rhythmic size. "Ajar" is the condition of things in this poem, and their dimension: both the oceans of separation that a slightly opened door might represent and the white sustenance (more terrifying because it is white, the color of absence)

that is despair. "Ajar" is the condition of love, the condition in which life — *which is over there* — might be lived.

Dickinson builds her "narrative" on the ride of a religious-mythic trope — to "live-die-rise" in "Heaven-Hell-despair" — linked in its parts by her growing sense of inadequacy when compared to her antagonist, who in the course of things appears to have numinous presence beyond that of a would-be lover. (The "you" is commonly considered to be Rev. Charles Wadsworth, Dickinson's second "preceptor" and "kindly spiritual counsel," and probably the one man [married] she ever imagined she was in love with. Wadsworth's move to California in 1862 — an "ajar" of three thousand miles — likely accounts for her most poetically productive, painful year.) This trope, which presides in any number of her poems though never so prolonged, moves along a line of development that ultimately describes a circle, so that the idea of "living" at the beginning of the poem undergoes its transformations only to return to its reprised and fully defined state of "living in despair." The leitmotifs of home-references echo this reprising as we advance from quaint or broken porcelain, "Discarded of the Housewife" (which wife, we wonder — Wadsworth's literal wife or the wife Dickinson would be), to "my homesick Eye," to the awful "Door," with its partialness and partitioning (two sides). The domestic touches help keep the ironic (ajar) resurrection allegory from becoming too righteous, of course; but even more they underscore the reality of what is at stake: homemaking, housekeeping, homesickness.

Typical of the contrariness in Dickinson's tone, the poem is stratified in negatives, except the darkest and last moment when the terminal stanza makes the one rhetorically positive assertion that "We must meet apart. . . ." So we proceed through a series of I-cannots, I-could-nots and had-no-mores, in order for the speaker to reiterate her unworthiness for the lived life, the community of love. The degree of her self-rejection is formidable in that it so depends on the superiority of the other: life is over there, you are over there, while I am here, and the ajarring distance — though it may look like a crack in the door — is an abyss

as intimidating as it is non-negotiable. In fact, it is Hell, and closer to Dante than to Edward Taylor. There is no more naked moment in Dickinson than the penultimate stanza when she declares that "were you — saved — /And I — condemned to be/Where you were not — /That self — were Hell to Me —." The abyss suddenly moves inside and "here" (the dominant slanting rhyme with "ajar" and "despair") becomes the existential position of one who has realized the truth of her separation, alienation, and isolation. It is the condition of white, the shade of nothing.

Still, all in all, Dickinson's great poem does not in itself feel as empty as the emptiness it protects. Quite the contrary, it feels full, replete and articulate in the teeth of its denials. Perhaps this is so because the poem's details and configurations are so well worked through; perhaps because the phrasing is so stone-cutter brilliant; perhaps because the epigrammatic impulse has submitted to the generous process of the experience, pressure point by pressure point. The poem is richest to me, however, because of the sacred honesty it achieves at no sacrifice to its beauty. #640 is a masterpiece of sustained yet suspended voice. It draws no conclusions, supports no moral, wins no philosophy. Each aspect of its nature carries forward; each image yields to and opens, inevitably, on the next; each phase motivates its length; each negative is answered, until, in the "saturation" at the end, where all the rhymes ring true, the poem closes with just its door ajar. There is a strange resignation in "I cannot live with you," a reconciliation at best understood at the outset and at the least consummated at the finish. The poem is confident with knowledge and the acceptance of that knowledge but in no way smug. The pain, like the tone of the writing, is transparent.

The year before #640, Dickinson wrote a kind of prequel, a comic mask to its tragic face. #289, "I know some lonely Houses off the Road" (one of several pentameter lines in the poem), is, at forty lines, her second longest piece; it toys with the same core ending image of a door ajar ("Fancy the Sunrise — left the door ajar!"), while reversing the build-up by making the final stanza the shortest, though it plays with a similar rhyme ("Sneer . . .

'Where'/astir/ajar"). The conceit of the poem is thievery in the middle of the night ("I know some lonely Houses off the Road/A Robber'd like the look of —"), in which the interior of the house is violated yet nothing is stolen. There are two characters (one to hand the tools, the other to peep), whose act as robbers makes them subversives to the aging social order, rather like a spinster loving a married man in nineteenth-century Amherst, Massachusetts. But there is no harm done. With wit and devilment, the poem becomes an inventory of curiosity about other people's small "plunder" — tankard, spoon, earring, watch, an ancient brooch — and about how the moonlight — and ultimately the morning sunlight — illuminates the intimacy of privacy. It is a poem about the house of an "old Couple," so trusting in their habits they leave the "Windows hanging low."

On the other hand, where poems really live, #289 is about secrecy and the subversive nature of the imagination and about how fantasy foreshadows a world we come to live in. However playful its tone, its essential images of the night, the robbers (lovers in the moonlight), and the door ajar anticipate the terms that define the lament and requirement of #640, where this time the lonely house is not off the road but right on Main Street (Dickinson's real address) and where this time the warm intimacy of the old searched house — as if one were antiquing — becomes the enormous distance (Wadsworth is leaving) within walls. The door ajar in #289 leads out and lets in the sunrise; the door in #640 is within the domestic spaces of the house, which in themselves are so vast they can contain oceans, prayer, and "that White Sustenance —/ Despair —." Even the sequence of the passing night, with the ticking clock, the sliding moon, the rattle of the first daylight, the third sycamore, and Chanticleer at sunrise — even this sequence looks forward to the Christian cycle rewritten later. But since emotion is a narrative, Dickinson will not, cannot let the matter rest with sunrise and resurrection. #640's extra length derives from its need to satisfy its despair, to turn its afterlife into a living hell that she can live with, in which she is "condemned to be" where the other isn't. It is as if in trying out her terms of engagement in the lighter poem — intimacy, subver-

sion, escape — Dickinson finds a language to deal with and transform the emotional crisis in the darker poem: a language she can fall back on, a language familiar and domestic enough that she can risk the intensity of an extreme that leaves her no exit.

280

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading — treading — till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through —

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum —
Kept beating — beating — till I thought
My Mind was going numb —

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space — began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here —

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down —
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing — then —

THE OUTER FROM THE INNER

"The Outer — from the Inner / Derives its Magnitude," she wrote (#451), but the metaphorical traffic is two-way. The outer world comes in: "One need not be a Chamber — to be Haunted" (#670). But the poet also goes out, even beyond the world, drunkenly "Leaning against the — Sun" (#214), or uncannily touching "the Universe," "Beyond the Dip of Bell" (#378).

"I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (#280) travels in both directions, not only embodying both movements, but also conflating their terms. The distance between inner and outer is often an issue for Dickinson, a situation that metaphor seeks to overcome. It succeeds in this poem, and does something more besides: the poem's astonishing reversal of inner and outer is so powerful that it ends up producing something like the aesthetic opposite of the terrifying experience it sets out to describe.

The first two stanzas are neatly metaphorical, but emotionally cramped: though a narrative structure moves us systematically through the stages of a funeral, with ritualistic repetition of syntax and sound, the location of the funeral "in my Brain" both compresses and intensifies the ordeal. The third stanza promises a change of both syntax and scene, as the service ends; but the intensity of the internalized experience is increased, as the mourners' "treading — treading" is replaced by the pallbearers' "Boots of Lead" creaking "across my Soul," presumably on the way out of the church, on the way to the metaphorical cemetery.

At this point, though, both narrative and metaphorical expectations are defeated, and the terms of the metaphor, the "inner" and "outer" of the poem, are suddenly reversed. "Then," at the end of the third stanza, appears to introduce a continuation of the story, but is actually a break from it: just when we can imagine the church door opening, what's been inside the speaker's mind is suddenly thrust outside it altogether. We're still in the metaphorical mode; but now, though the funeral sounds continue, bell replacing boots and drum, it's space, everything outside the speaker, that contains the sound. What had been so uncomfortably proscribed within the brain is now in opposition to it, while

"Being" is what we might expect space to be, merely receptive of sound. The speaker joins "Silence" and perhaps "Being" as well to create a "Race" on a metaphorical island where they're "wrecked," as from a shipwreck; but the status of being "solitary" and even "here" is in marked contrast to the crowded state of the brain produced by the mourners. Though frightening and nightmarishly surreal, the reversal offers some aesthetic release from the colossal headache suggested by the first two stanzas.

But the resolution isn't complete. The funeral story resumes in the final stanza, the metaphorical procession having arrived at the graveyard in the interval. A "Plank in Reason" returns us to the mind as well as the narrative; but when it breaks it takes the initial metaphor with it, for the speaker falls not into the grave but rather into the space of the fourth stanza, thereby fusing the two metaphorical structures of the poem: the speaker who had circumscribed a funeral in her brain has entered the magnitude of space, hitting "a World, at every plunge."

This space travel is of course terrifying: the speaker has, after all, "Finished knowing." What this end of consciousness may "refer to" has been much debated: is Dickinson describing despair, a nervous breakdown, a spiritual crisis, the onset of madness, the repression of thought, a fainting spell, or merely a migraine headache? Or is she, in fact, imagining what it's like to be dead? If the poem's otherworldly ending is more astronomical than theological, it's nonetheless possible to sense that the speaker has so thoroughly absorbed the metaphor that vehicle has become tenor by the end of the poem, bringing her into the ranks of the posthumous who speak in poems like "I heard a Fly buzz — when I died."

But then there's the final "then." Much like the "Then" that introduces the metaphorical shift in line 12, the word at the end opens up the poem. It's of course possible to read "then" as a final narrative marker, but that leaves us with the tension of wondering how one so finished with knowing can speak so knowingly of the process of finishing. In fact, "then" necessarily suggests its opposite, a possibility that's underscored by the punctuation surrounding it: setting it off from "knowing" and following

it with a dash leave the reader with an intonational uncertainty that's ultimately liberating. And once the inflection of "then" begins to shift, "Finished knowing" may begin to shimmer a little too: the words are primarily and inarguably final, but isn't it possible to put an inflectional spin on "knowing," so that the emphasis shifts to the positive, as in "finished in a state of knowing"? Perhaps there's a glimmer of this even in the first stanza, where "Sense was breaking through."

"'Tis so appalling — it exhilarates": the line that begins the next poem in the 1955 *Poems*, and in Dickinson's own arrangement, may serve as a commentary on this one. And while the identity of the "it" in both poems may be beyond determination, that's certainly part of the strength of "I felt a Funeral," which is, like so many of Dickinson's poems of extremity, a linguistic and aesthetic triumph over the psychological terror it so boldly confronts and conveys.

182

If I shouldn't be alive
When the Robins come,
Give the one in Red Cravat,
A Memorial crumb.

If I couldn't thank you,
Being fast asleep,
You will know I'm trying
With my Granite lip!

HOMAGES: EMILY DICKINSON

Emily Dickinson was a failure in her lifetime; and although she is no doubt the most famous failure we are aware of — she was not even well enough known to the art world of the nineteenth century to be neglected, as van Gogh was — there is nothing strange about this. (What's strange is the occasional existence of great artists who are successes.) Still, that she produced major and stylistically unprecedented, inimitable work in a condition of near-absolute anonymity and deprivation of other writers' friendship and is, what's more, the only woman besides Sappho to have achieved such a thing in twenty-six centuries of what's commonly referred to as Western civilization, is part of what makes her supremely mysterious and endearing. Of course, she made no particular effort to succeed. We know of only one attempt at literary correspondence and self-promotion: her first letter (including four poems) to the poor infamous Higginson, whose name survives because and only because he was unable to recognize Dickinson's writings as poetry at all, was mailed from Amherst to Worcester in 1862 when she was thirty-one and being consumed by a creative period of such obsessive ferocity that she simply accepted his tepid responses and her own disappointment, lacking the energy apparently to pursue the opinions of other critics. She was certainly more impregnably enclosed in the primacy of inspiration and the writing down of what she heard — over, that is, the need to be recognized as someone who wrote — than any other poet I can name. My God, she makes Kafka look like a crazed opportunist. I think the Higginson letters were finally more a desperately lonely plea for concern (and love perhaps) and for an acknowledgment of her existence than anything else.

And what was she supposed to do but fail? A few women who shared, or endured, more or less the same historical period had bravely achieved some literary recognition; however, they lived in Europe not puritan America, they wrote novels, and the novel — I'm aware of the august exceptions — is a form of popular entertainment. A couple quite beautiful poets come to mind,

but in the end what they forged were traditional echoes. Emily Dickinson will always stand out. She is virtually the embodiment of the lyric imagination at its most original, which is to say its most universally wounding.

When approaching Dickinson's poems it makes no difference whether one chooses to employ the terminology of the sacred and thus refer to states of inspiration imposed supernaturally from without (the threadbare muse metaphor comes to mind, naturally) or to borrow from the seductive jargon of psychology and entertain notions regarding the violent and euphoric intrusion of the unconscious into the conscious mind, &c. Her capacity to both wield and serve as an instrument of that force, whatever it is, which makes available to the senses mute feelings, inexplicable moods, thoughts, perceptions and all invisible things derived *in part* from, or, who knows, was strengthened by, the crisis of her early thirties, which had less to do with renunciation or even acceptance in the face of inevitable failure than a rapid evolution in the poet toward *desire* that things should be precisely as they were. In the body of work — astonishing by any standards in its consistent brilliance and voluminousness — which continued abundantly putting its leaves out after this point in her life, we have proof of her unwitnessed spiritual victory. It enabled her to go on drawing energy directly from a state of consciousness familiar to poets, as a rule, only in childhood and during the earliest awareness of a calling — a condition in which they are still mentally free, in Blake's sense, from the hunger to be liked and admired by and ultimately take some part in the aesthetic government of their times. In this state of mind, neither ambition nor disappointment or success in that ambition have yet darkened the experience of making something from nothing, or dulled the unquestioned belief that language is magical, can alter or "cleanse" one's perceptions and allow one to see what others fail to notice: that spirit, as Guy Davenport writes, "shines from matter; one embraces the two together, inseparable." Thus Dickinson was able to put into practice perpetually what some lyric poets achieve at intervals and most know only as a remote longing, writing again and again (as in accordance with what might be

thought of as the *artist's* categorical imperative) the poem one would write if no possibility of a reader existed.

*

Dickinson was not more isolated than most middle-class women of her era, her deepest seclusion occurring in the last years of her life when she was writing very little; and obviously her secrecy was the result of unattainably high standards and not fear of being caught in some deviant form of behavior. (In our most perversely and fearfully puritanical of Western cultures poetry — it gets more bizarre the more you think about it — has always been widely and with open derogation considered a "womanish" diversion.) However, it's a commonplace that women had endured artistic isolation as an age-old norm, possessing neither models nor the incentive of a public forum or stage that would make possible taking themselves seriously. There is no historical inevitability about Emily Dickinson's appearance, hidden career, and the vast creation that flowed from her, any more than there is about that of other great solitary founders. What's certain is that there is a connection between the awakening to her presence, which began in the first decade of her death, and the wholly unprecedented exfoliation in the American twentieth century of major poetry written by women. The feminist movement's growing momentum doesn't explain it. The spectacle of women storming at last the ancient and once seemingly adamantine citadels of male professional authority, the courage with which female human beings have transformed the formerly unthinkable into a still-future but unstoppable reality, represents the highest kind of psychological and social victory and establishes the existence of an immeasurably healthier world to be born into — but there is nothing really mysterious about any of this. We are simply witnessing the putting into practice of a finally irresistible principle of sanity: women are as intelligent, resourceful, energetic, ruthless, desirous of influence and financial independence, and as generally indomitable when it comes to both survival and personal advancement as males are. We already take it for granted,

but what is really electrifyingly strange and new is that men and women alike — the small but significant number with an interest in such things — may now read in books and hear publicly spoken aloud something that *only* women can provide. Voices hard-trained to hypnotic beauty emanating from the feminine psyche is one way it might be described. And though Dickinson's was not the first, it was without question the most paralyzingly masterful to be raised. There is no way to imagine her effect on the first women with poetic aspirations to read her, but the experience had to have had much in common with one of those abrupt Copernican reorientations of physical perception or with one or another of the most intoxicating and subversive manifestations of the holy in the midst of the bored desolation of everyday things. No, some experiences can't be imagined or described. But to think of such a thing occurring, how splendid that is.

*

The two quatrains of 1860, designated as number 182 in the *Complete Poems* edited by T. H. Johnson, constitute one of the most appallingly cunning and poignant poems in the language. Its initial impact derives from the fact that while its subject is the poet's death (in fact the poet is practically addressing the reader — or in Dickinson's case, no one — as a corpse), it does so with all the mysticism, self-pity or religious rationalization of an animal. Structurally it is a kind of fugue in which lines which might be spoken by any child — the opening verse suggests a skewed version of the famous children's prayer — alternate with words, raised to the most sophisticated power and economy, of an adult capable of facing with the sanity of sadness this central yet incomprehensible human experience, in effect the ordeal which makes us human: helpless awareness of the fact that to be here and witness the creation one must first be ripped from it and then, almost immediately, learn to anticipate in fear the return to it; the return to the norm of eternal *being without knowing it* enjoyed by the creatures and things all around us. The effect of these eight lines is terrible, and irresistible. Exposure to them is

mnemonically indelible, almost cruelly so, like one's most haunting disappointment in love. It would be an incurious mind that could resist the eerie dissonant chord of the second stanza, which goes on and on in the memory and is startling each time it's returned to, particularly coming immediately after the perfect rhyme of the first. And justification for Dickinson's sometimes eccentric use of capitalization comes across in this instance with clear and deliberate force: "Memorial" followed by "crumb" with its exaggeratedly humble lowercase *c*, the ponderousness of "Granite" followed, again, by a diminished (and singular) "lip" — . . . In this instance Dickinson passes beyond the most arcane possibilities of versification to actually create images by making words *look* like the objects they denote. Then there is the parallelism of the stanza's final lines, which produces a vivid constellating of living mouth and voice together with the voiceless forgotten struggling to name themselves, to be remembered. (The very moving straightforwardness of diction brings to mind Aeschylus, in whose *Agamemnon* one reads four hundred lines before coming on an overt metaphor.) And it is always intriguing, in a somewhat hair-raising way, to contemplate the use of the word "shouldn't" in the first line. There are no coincidences in someone like Dickinson, and it is the small, easily overlooked moments such as this one, more even than her dark punch lines, that emit a sort of moral vertigo and make the mere act of opening her book a perilous act. Deep down you realize you can never live a life like the one that produced these poems.They can, with emotional surefootedness, be admired from the edge; nobody can follow her footsteps into the air.

*

A small number of Dickinson's fiercely implosive inner-worldly poems were "circulated" during her life, mainly when she offered them as gestures of friendship in letters. But after the middle of her most intense writing years and before she started turning more and more to silence and deepening seclusion, she began the practice of packeting the stitched sheafs of her nearly

eighteen hundred poems and depositing them in drawers where, she rightly supposed, they'd be discovered by living eyes. God knows how she pictured their ultimate fate — her thoughts on this matter, if she had any, were no doubt pessimistic. (Incredibly, a first selection of them did appear in 1890, four years after her death, to some acclaim — one of the few proofs that there exists a tiny dim hope for humanity, though we shouldn't stop wondering why she had to be stiff for a while, like van Gogh, underground, before it became possible for *everyone* to see how beautiful they are.) It's strange to recall that at the time of this hidden activity she and Whitman were contemporaries. It's tempting to compare the personalities, aspirations and styles of these two, so different *on the surface*, and if someone would like to offer me a reasonable advance I'll write a book about it. Meanwhile, it is important to note that in the world of Emily Dickinson — unlike Whitman's, where death is a delusional creation of the mind — death, too, shines from matter. Her preoccupation with it is reflected again and again in her pages, and clearly it is very real to her, even when the grave itself represents a door to her favorite word *Eternity*, whatever it finally meant to her. Maybe the compulsion to write about it, in solitude and "failure," helped her bridge to some degree her disturbing perception of *hereness* and *thereness*, not just theologically but in life's every smallest detail.

Her experience of nature isn't Whitman's (or his persona's) experience of seamless unity, although in ways she is closer to it since she also cannot or will not share his sense of oceanic oneness with other people — aside from family, death, a small number of friends, and her ghostly relationship with herself, nature is all she has. She pays it loving attention, and it gives her something to love; to some extent, she identifies with it ("My apple blossoms / Obviate parade . . ."). She seems to experience its presence as that of sole equal (at any rate, as the only one who can understand her) fortunately available for purposes of conversation or correspondence, the sharing of terrible intimacies, jokes, fears and happy silences. But her poems obsessively well up from awakenings, sometimes calm, sometimes shattering, concerning what it means to live and die a human being. Some-

times she appears to employ natural imagery for purposes of verisimilitude in intellectual staging, and at others because without it it's impossible for her to speak at all. But her quietly unnerving poems bear to pastoralism the resemblance of a diamond to a lump of coal.

As serious artists both Whitman and Dickinson longed to give, to share; but it's primarily from Dickinson that American poets inherit *the* example of going on, in solitude and neglect if need be — in a sense, of loving without the possibility of being loved. This example is something we need terribly, in a time when poets are perhaps more alone than ever and genuine poetry more inaudible due to the din and confusion produced by a past quarter century which has produced more writers of verse manuscripts than devoted and knowledgeable readers of the sizable body of poetry (some of it in languages other than English) written before 1920. Emily Dickinson's presence provides proof that real poetry can always appear, inexplicably and indestructably, under any conditions. Poets can be killed off easily enough, but the poem is another matter.

1593

There came a Wind like a Bugle —
It quivered through the Grass
And a Green Chill upon the Heat
So ominous did pass
We barred the Windows and the Doors
As from an Emerald Ghost —
The Doom's electric Moccasin
That very instant passed —
On a strange Mob of panting Trees
And Fences fled away
And Rivers where the Houses ran
Those looked that lived — that Day —
The Bell within the steeple wild
The flying tidings told —
How much can come
And much can go,
And yet abide the World!

ELECTRIC MOCCASINS

We think of Emily Dickinson as a poet of human moments, documenting states of crisis, loss, bewilderment and elation. She is also, we know, a genius of metaphor, reifying and particularizing elusive aspects of spiritual and psychic experience, giving to belief and mystery forms and shapes and stories that we had not thought they could attain. She writes with confidence about the realm of the dead. Putting herself in their place, she turns and speaks to us from beyond life. And as she reports on her wrestlings with the giant angels of depression and despair, we marvel at her wit, her wry quickness and spareness, her poker-faced ability to turn tonal corners sharply, skidding into glee or horror without warning or preparation.

Less often, it seems to me, do we speak of her as a nature poet. A certain nervousness accompanies such discussions, almost as if we feared to discover that her nature is too cute — pretty flowers, busy bees and decorative sunrises — a lessening of that bold originality that makes her so much our model and mentor. Yet a little reflection will remind us that Dickinson was superb on the sheer otherness of animals — the snakes of "A narrow fellow in the grass" and "Sweet is the swamp with its secrets," the robin of "A bird came down the walk, " the hummingbirds of "Within my Garden, rides a Bird" and "A Route of Evanescence," and all the other bees, rats, and flies that populate her poems.

Her feeling for trees, meanwhile, is comparable to Thoreau's:

> Four Trees — upon a solitary Acre —
> Without Design
> Or Order, or Apparent Action —
> Maintain —
>
> The Sun — upon a Morning meets them —
> The Wind —
> No nearer Neighbor — have they —
> But God —

The Acre gives them — Place —
They — Him — Attention of Passer by —
Of Shadow, or of Squirrel, haply —
Or Boy —

What Deed is Theirs unto the General Nature —
What Plan
They severally — retard — or further —
Unknown —

I disagree with what Susan Howe (*My Emily Dickinson*) says about this poem: "This is the *process* of viewing Emptiness without design or plan, neighborless in winter blank, or blaze of summer. This is waste wilderness." How anthropocentric to assume that when the human factor is dropped out of the picture we have "Emptiness" and "waste [*waste!*] wilderness." A moment later, Howe brings up Nature as annihilation. Other critics have followed a similar pattern of response, assuming that the trees' existence outside a perceivable order or plan signals some kind of existential crisis for the speaker. But the speaker is calm and approving. It is the critics who have brought their weird equation of "waste" with "wilderness" to the poem. This kind of reading is one good reason why we need ecocriticism.

Much more to the point is what Guy Davenport says about this poem in his book *Burchfield's Seasons*, where he is comparing it to Burchfield's wonderful painting, *The Three Trees*. "It is the raw fact of the trees' existence that Dickinson focuses on," he argues, "making a piercing riddle of that fact." What he says about the painting applies equally well to the poem: "Burchfield's trees are beings, presences, silent and majestic cohabitants of the earth with the lion and the robin. They are alive in a different way, secretly in public view."

So Dickinson takes her place, I believe, in the long line of poets who have reconnected us with nature, with Neolithic and Paleolithic understandings of the sacredness and majesty of our environment, our natural home, resisting the hierarchic, hegemonic view of nature that is inadvertently reflected in Howe's as-

sumption that if we can't own and understand the trees we somehow face existential terror.

We need to honor Dickinson for her sense of the meaning, texture and innate value of nature, including its ultimate independence from human manipulation and control. In "A Bird came down the Walk" the speaker gains confidence by noting likenesses — the eyes are like beads, the head is like velvet — until the moment when the bird takes flight. That moment, charged with revelation, while it notes more likenesses, nevertheless kicks the props of human control out from under the poem, opening a vista of wonder and mystery. Her sense of nature's size and intricacy is everywhere evident in Dickinson's work, supporting her other insights and interlocking with them, early and late.

*

I've chosen the late (1883) summer thunderstorm poem, "There came a Wind like a Bugle," for two main reasons. First, it illustrates, having had earlier treatments, how Dickinson liked to come back to certain subjects and treat them again, Cézanne-like, building on previous achievement but unsatisfied, restless, pushing her own envelope. And it shows her accessing the natural sublime, finding a way — since she could seldom visit the sea, walk in the forest, climb high mountains, camp in the wilderness — to confront the awesome and destructive side of nature that romantic poets had made a favorite location for reconsidering the human place in the universe, and that American literature and painting were revisiting on the new terms dictated by a New World.

Around 1864 Dickinson had done a version (#894) of a thunderstorm poem, one that she shortly revised to good effect. She had begun, for instance, in what must have seemed to her too domestic a fashion:

> The Wind begun to knead the Grass —
> As Women do a Dough —
> He flung a Hand full at the Plain —
> A Hand full at the Sky —

In revision, this became more somber, with the wind as a kind of master musician and demonic giant:

> The Wind begun to rock the Grass
> With threatening Tunes and low —
> He threw a Menace at the Earth —
> A Menace at the Sky

The following stanza needed little reworking. Now that the earlier hands image had been removed, the hands of the dust were new to the poem, and rather startling:

> The leaves unhooked themselves from Trees —
> And started all abroad
> The Dust did scoop itself like Hands
> And threw away the Road.

The next stanza substitutes "hurried slow" where she had first written "gossiped low," exchanging another domestic image for an oxymoron, and alters "Yellow Head" and "livid Toe" to "Yellow Beak" and "livid Claw," making a blond giant (with a sore toe?) into a gigantic bird of prey:

> The Wagons quickened on the Streets
> The Thunder hurried slow —
> The Lightning showed a Yellow Beak
> And then a livid Claw.

The new version, thereafter, pretty much follows the first:

> The Birds put up the Bars to Nests —
> The Cattle fled to Barns —
> There came one drop of Giant Rain
> And then as if the Hands
>
> That held the Dams had parted hold
> The Waters Wrecked the Sky,
> But overlooked my Father's House —
> Just quartering a Tree —

I should also note that the first version doesn't use stanza breaks. In general, the poem shows Dickinson's expertise at quick-sketch evocation: not only of the details of a violent summer storm, but of the psychology of response in humans, who combine fear, awe and wonder in their confrontation with forces beyond their control. The "Father's House" echoes the Bible and makes the storm a force that is separate from, and even threatening to, God himself. It could have hurt a sky-god when it wrecked the sky, but it contented itself with the torture and execution of a single tree. A tree in the Garden of Eden? The blasted tree that shows up in so many romantic paintings? We hesitate to go too far afield, and our imaginations settle back into Amherst and the house where Dickinson spent her life.

Her decision, in revising, to make the poem a little less domestic and a little less anthropomorphic shows her urge to take us to the edge of what we can comprehend and identify with. The otherness of the storm, its tendency to have more identities and features than we can easily assimilate, is more fully rendered in the second version. But that Dickinson was still not satisfied with what she had accomplished is demonstrated by her return to the subject, almost twenty years later, in "There came a Wind like a Bugle."

*

This late poem takes some of her stylistic characteristics, her signature as a poet, a step or two further:

1. A more difficult syntax, especially in the sentence that begins "On a strange Mob of panting Trees" and doesn't arrive at its verb ("Those looked") for several more lines. We are very likely to imagine the moccasin treading on the trees until we have worked out the periodic sentence and realized that a full break exists between the images.

2. An ambiguous placement of adjectives — is the steeple wild or is it the bell? — and of verbs: does "lived" mean "happened to be

alive" or "survived"?; and what exactly does "abide" at the end? At first we are likely to think of ourselves, trying to be at home in a world of such unpredictable meteorological destruction; then we are apt to move to the insight that it is the world that abides while we come and go, all too briefly.

3. Detail that requires pondering — in what sense are the "Fences fled away"? — and questions about precisely how severe the storm finally was: was there, for instance, a flood? Did it move among and around houses or did it actually destroy and carry some away?

4. A superb economy in the chain of evocations, each image giving rise to the next. The bugle suggests the Last Judgment for a moment, and then, as we pick up the distinction between bugle and trumpet, the army or cavalry, a marching column which the quivering grass then metamorphoses into a snake, the snake in turn (zero at the bone) becoming a "green chill" that calls up the experience of fever, so much more feared (because so much less treatable) in the poet's day, while the Emerald Ghost transforms that green chill's color to precious stone and its quivering presence, now a held musical note, a sliding serpent, and an invasive fever, all resonating together like a chord, into an eerie spirit that can next be identified as "Doom," wearing an "electric Moccasin."

I want to dwell a moment, finally, on that last detail, as a way of exploring Dickinson's experiments with an American sublime. The issue is partly one of diction. No British poet would be likely to use the Algonquin/Narragansett word for wilderness footgear that had long been associated with Native Americans and adopted by the backwoodsmen and trappers who had borrowed so freely from the indigenous cultures. Moccasins can also, we might note, be deadly snakes and harmless flowers. One critic, in hot pursuit of the phallic, would have the moccasin in this poem be *only* a snake.

Doom would not wear a moccasin, surely, in the English Lake District or on the moors or across the Alps. Whether its footgear would ever be "electric" in a European poem is also an interesting

question. Is an electric moccasin simply the manifestation of energy typical of a thunderstorm, or are we encountering once again the machine in the garden, to borrow Leo Marx's phrase, that crossing and clashing of technology and pastoral that have been so characteristic of our literature? Rather than settle these speculations, I offer them as evidence that Dickinson's poem takes its place in the long-standing dialogue between English and American poetry on such issues as the meaning of wilderness, the nature of the sublime, the place of other cultures in the dominant culture, and the precariousness of settlements and settlers — issues that we also find Whitman, Frost, Stevens, Moore and Williams engaged with, both implicitly and overtly.

Our sublime, the tacit argument runs, is different, and we need different images, different diction and a different response to articulate it. Those who came here found a wilderness far vaster and less "humanized" than anything European humanity had known for many thousands of years. They also found peoples living amongst that wilderness who had never felt separate from it or driven to subdue and control it. They were very much like the Paleolithic and Neolithic peoples who preceded the European civilizations and lived in harmony with their environment for some 200,000 years of prehistory. It was as though humankind turned a corner and found itself facing its own deep past, encountering its own beginnings and recovering its lost mode of understanding nature. Of course civilization was *officially* better, but both pastoral and Christianity carried implicit messages about the corrupting effects of culture and the fall of humanity from a better, earlier state that made the alternative humanity of native American peoples a powerful attractant and implicit challenge.

The world is full of change and mystery. Yet the world abides. And as it does that, it is our world, a unique one. An American summer thunderstorm is a singular experience. It has much in common with the storms of other literatures and cultures, but possesses distinctive details, moments and meanings of its own. Our poets try to show us how this is true, insofar as language is capable of such demonstration. When Americans read Dickinson

they have an opportunity to compare their own experiences to her evocations, a bond of shared existence that gives them a sense of privilege and empathy. Jingoism and nationalism are not at issue here. It is more the question of how we come to understand our place in our own environment. Surely we do it more fully when there is a poetry of that environment to guide and enlighten us. Such a poetry, and such an understanding, were necessary in Paleolithic times, and our need for them is even greater now.

Next time you are in a summer thunderstorm, listen carefully for Doom's electric moccasin. It will be both thunderous and inaudible, familiar and strange, the footgear of an emerald ghost. Nature will be unleashing some of its mysteries. Not for your benefit, though you are privileged to witness. A mob of trees will gather, panting. Fences, our way of ordering place and marking ownership, will disappear in the face of what we can't control, becoming irrelevant. Where there were houses, rivers may come again.

We come and go. The world abides. The idea that Dickinson was not a nature poet seems absurd, just as the idea that nature poets are simply admiring birds and scenery falls far short of their true function and value. But that is another lesson, for another time and place.

HOME VIDEOS OF THE HURRICANE

—Kokee State Park Natural Museum, Kauai

It starts out funny: his own house
shattered, he turns to the neighbor's — *Holy Jesus,*
there goes Frank's roof. A trillion
billion particles an hour: bits of shingle, shards
of lathe and wallboard, the fabulous
souvenir lampshade soaring off.
Soon enough the steeple of whatever church
explodes, the spirit life
gone TNT. Just wait.
Trees uproot. Bushes fly drugged
as anything with wings
after a glut of certain berries.
And gradually, and quick as light,
fear fills up
the small museum, people standing or sitting still
to watch the ruin
even as we speak. No one speaks.
We gape and breathe
too hard — nothing
Hollywood could manage, this bit by bit,
everyone's ragged version
pieced together, a hellish quilt. That
fascinates, that
rules the mob of us
down to a quiet sugar. It's the windows
I'll remember, their long X's
made of tape, just
before. A kind of prayer — *o spare us* — not
what it really was, target
after target.

FASTING

Some wounds are made of feathers.
Ask the smallest woodpecker whose neck
cries out a single drop. I was startled
but it was ordinary
tapping, not ice going dark into water
as I first thought. Tiny wounds
in a tangle of branches — the berries
hurt because the snow's too white.
Or wounds blacken the whole sky; one gets
caught, gets soaked in it. I've been peaceful,
walking that way before anything started
though a voice said, the world
is flat, don't sail to the edge. Maybe
I would have believed that, would have
stood at the harbor stricken as the horizon
swallowed one ship
or two ships. Turning, I saw
blood on the wing of a blackbird,
a brief thing in flight, a marking.

NEST

I walked out, and the nest
was already there by the step. Woven basket
of a saint
sent back to life as a bird
who proceeded to make
a mess of things. Wind
right through it, and any eggs
long vanished. But in my hand it was
intricate pleasure, even the thorny reeds
softened in the weave. And the fading
leaf mold, hardly
itself anymore, merely a trick
of light, if light
can be tricked. Deep in a life
is another life. I walked out, the nest
already by the step.

FISH

Under the sewage bridge, where everything
turned echo and cool, two men stared
into the filth for fish, though not
an inch of that stream
was blue, not a handful of stone
the right original color, and all
things scattered
like stars — old cans and wire,
and rusted TV tables — no,
never glistened.
But those men had nets and lines,
all the usual stuff: a beat-up
truck braked high
under the long-leafed
whatever tree that was. To be slow
then alert to the frantic ones, big
enough for the shallow part —
they wanted things
with eyes.

So they stalked
and quick, it was smothered
to the silver pail. Hardly a word
between them because anything under a bridge
is endless. A hook,
a net: there are ways
to be haunted worse.
But those fish
that ate whatever clotted thing
lay for weeks in water —

all this time, and still
mornings, or afternoons, light pooling
certain ways. That awful pulse
against the metal bucket. Sometimes
at night. In my sleep even.

THE EXTERMINATOR

The exterminator comes with his
circus tent and wraps up the house, whistling something
odd but not
Bach, this the simplest of Tuesdays
neither sunny nor
athrob with gloom.
Little doomed creatures somewhere near only
follow the smell of something. A crumb something.
A piece of whatever-broke-off-and-fell-
behind something. They go in steady
ancient lines for it, pitched forward
under lathe and board. Tiniest
first things! — in the wall, beneath the stairs,
living out their all-in-a-line.
We walk by and see only
stripes on the tent, and a man
in a glorious jumpsuit. A kid in a t-shirt
leans back on a car, chewing gum,
the eternal assistant, bored
as anyone with a future. And the jumpsuit guy —
he may love the fumes, who knows? — is
setting down the lines of poison, just so,
from the massive pump on wheels
in the driveway. The pump —
the pump is neither brain
nor heart. But how
careful he is, checking
panels and knobs, speaking quietly
to the machine and then to the boy and then
to himself. Imagine
the darkened house, the vast
unknowing there, little
by little.

GOOD WILL

Overwhelmingly generous, this doll's head,
eyes rolled upward, next to the black ice skates,

loosely laced, lumpy at the ankles, chipped blades.
Whoever left these cared that someone have them

to fall through ice. I should take them.
I should tell people I'm Oksana Baiul.

This would please the strangers
who — hopeful, blind — stop to tell me

there is a resemblance. Kind, absent-minded
strangers with too much time, lonely

for talk, abandoned by their dogs
for the stronger, street-ripe smell of trash.

I'd like to meet the anonymous donors
of this center's drop-off lot.

After hours, they pull up in their station wagons
to dump their load in the gray snow,

after the gate's been closed.
How free each one must feel driving away,

knowing someone else will clean up, the bulk
and circumstances of all things had

forever left behind.
I'd like to wish them well in their new lives.

Only the severely insane or clinically dead
could find bargains here:

flat empty purses, records without jackets,
just the left shoe.

Is this as good as we get in giving —
accumulated, worn, stripped, tossed

shrouds drained of color — one employee
with a truck to fill by next morning,

picking through thinking — someone, ah someone,
can use this.

EIGHT GLASSES OF WATER A DAY

Where do they go
if not out the body, and eventually,
miraculously, back to earth.

Nothing drowns beneath skin,
all surfaces like snakes
out pores,

the crawl spaces
pungent with fear
and love.

It's good, other women tell me,
this cleansing.
Imagine a hose

left on, always full.
Imagine a rhododendron
in a forest,

an explosion of color —
after rain,
after surrender.

A man could still love me,
my face, — moist
bundt cake,

soft as a nun's,
supple cuticles
pushed back,

decades of poison released.
I want to live longer
so that I can drink

more, excusing myself
quietly from every room.
Let me die

preoccupied —
a steady rowing backwards,
fires extinguished.

LAMENTATIONS

. . . sitting in forgotten chairs . . .
— Paul Zweig

You dang near pulled my finger off says
my neighbor to her dog
and her dog stares briefly and breaks.
She's recently married to her
second husband, Gerald, the happiness
new and dramatic, but there are pains, or numbnesses,
her whole left side seems half
alive, the cervical area, she
points with her right arm and forefinger
behind her neck, this might be it . . . .
Her dog has stopped and stands still
as if straddling two cities.
The insolent white star of his chest.
The love of sitting in forgotten chairs.
The laughter of two people, the
yield, the humility
endlessly.

Not the boredom and fear,
not the waiting, not the motion
and momentum. Only
the spokelike tender turnings like
a bicycle clicking through time.
The pain situates here
and here, the left holds on to
the right, the dog has
flown to what he imagines
as the final spectra —
where else would one wear a leash
over the shoulder
like the scarf of an airman?

ODE TO THE ROOM OF THE DEAD FISH & TO THE DEAD FISH

Anything that goes wrong goes here, in a jar.
Here are the soft fish,
digressive.
The flesh
misspelling itself.
They suffer the glass like a wish
I press my face
hard against,
squinting into the light.
What wanting shapes them?
The four-eyed, the fin-holed, a!l sort
of tumor, all white, almost
opaque, a circus
of bad births.
In Bangkok the faithful press
gold scales onto available Buddhas.
Where it's hardest to see
brings the most luck.
Everything's strange enough.

I enter the room where the moons dwell.
I've been here before,
to the tongue's slur,
the blurted out no-cause
I-love-you's.
They are like each bad time with a loved one
one holds for how
it eases the inevitable loss and for this
we love the fish.
From so many seas they are their own
democracy.
O arabesque fish!
Whey-faced congestive
genetics.

Now you hold
the best seats in the house,
all glass frontages.

There is no door to the room of the dead fish.
The room glows.
There are no odes. Nodes. No, they are owed
us who make a museum
of them.

Still the room glows.
I will forget the fish . . . .
When I forget the fish
what will be there to remember
the whiteness by?
Everything's strange enough.
You don't have to make up anybody.
You don't have to miss anything.
You don't have to speak
above a modest prayer, but if you do. If you ask.
If you're wrong . . . as if
one misconception
dissipates
the weight of our necessary fear.

LETTER

How are you? I hate to ask. I got your nails.
The old man at Winks who couldn't find them found them
on a back shelf. He called them *infinitesimal.*
They are for someone I said who mounts endangered
butterflies on velvet-covered coreboard
because he wants something beautiful that won't get away
against a backdrop
that will keep him from valuing the whole thing over much.
Then I had another thought. I didn't write it down and I lost it.
That's the way I am now.
What is the social context of cells?

Today it snowed so I read about the bower bird though cause
and effect is mostly tenuous like today and yesterday
but get this, the bower bird picks blue
to make its nest. Blue this, blue that.
The object attends but, really,
weather's what's interesting.
Everytime it just sits down to what it is.
When the call came to come in, talk in person
it must have added up. That mock-bronchial cough.
The day's terminal
appointment shit
I almost envy you almost
knowing where you
locate the infinite. Sick!
I'm afraid of what you'll miss John.
Of missing you. Today Jeff said of a moment
in a poem I wrote, "I hate those canned moments in second
person direct address
when the reader knows it's him who is really being addressed.
Romantic!"
Does your life feel different, the way immediately you know
when the tunnel is no longer France, it has become Italy?

That darkness isn't the same and the train rumbles
the tracks with a different racket. What I can't ask you
couldn't tell me. The darkness
is the same. Write soon. Forgive me
when I use you.
Holding his cup of mucous, cells, erratica, pus, what else?
Then something-other's clumsy-handed someone and it spills.

M

THE SLAUGHTERHOUSE

God is in the detail.
The god of blood is in
the heme molecule.

The gelid god Thanatos
is the microscopic whisper
in the brain stem —
and the transcendental tremble
of flesh
follows.

The god of calves
is the god of steaks and chops.

Over the red brick sheds
containing
the comprehensive roar of the world,

in the stinking azure sky,
a rope-walker balances
always pondering
just the next short step.

ANATOMY OF SEPTEMBER

Not yet.

In the submarine gardens the sea-grasses
still wave.
In the sky the biplane of the jugglers
still holds on
by tooth and nail.

In the blue room, on uneven tracks,
a toy train circles incessantly,
driven by a spring

and with no destination.

ANATOMY OF DECEMBER

Cracking of vertebrae.

Stooping, we compete
frenetically, at the paralympiad
of benefactors,
in calcium metabolism.

And lo, in the ion channel
a little candle. *And lo,*
the humped saint *saw,*

and behold, it was very good.

A MORAVIAN CASTLE

And by night
a ten-point stag
slinks through the corridors, searching
for his head among the trophies,

as if a head could still belong
to anybody

in this age
of intestines.

RESURRECTING

By midnight
the vampires will appear, without ears, with tentacles,
fangs protruding,
and among them a well-groomed TV show host.

And the tombs will open, mummies
scraping across the thresholds, skeletons
swaying their legs on the churchyard walls,
prophets and witches will rise,
eunuchs and dukes, unbaptized babies,
serfs and suicides.

For every three, one purgatorial camera-man,
because you need a recording
for a metaphysics with punch . . .

Everyone will re-enact
the big moment:
the leap from the fifth floor
will be shot by the miniature guardian angel
who resembles a vigilant flying fish,

the vehmic murder will be captured by
an armored lizard with four Agfa eyes,
the sadistic sex performance of a Chinese cook
with a Polish nun by a black Betamax monk,
who closely resembles a mole cricket.

Van Gogh's ear
will be recorded at the cut plane
by a fiddler crab
with a bifocal microscope.

The autumn battle of sad kings
by a golden yellow wooden-legged saint,
The Love of Three Oranges
by a celluloid video virgin.

It will be eternity turned inside out,
the world throwing up, broadcast live,
mirroring in the eye of a blind god,
the scream of futility
which so far hasn't known
that's what it is.

translated by David Young, with the author

QUESTIONS

Why is it that with grief
the pain comes down the left arm, so,
and the three fingers from the smallest
to the middle
curve in their disability
as though cradling a small stone?

Is this what I meant to ask?

No.

We sit drinking coffee and eating bread,
the stranger behind me so close
I could touch him with my elbow.
I order what you order,
thinking to taste what you taste
in my mouth.

Is this what I meant to say?

No.

This is it:
A light, very far away,
flashing in the night sky,
warning that which flies
of earth's existence.
My mind dwells there
in its persistence

BALA, KANSAS—1979

*

Deer ticks rustle in the dry grass
as we pass along the rutted path.

They sense our body heat inches away,
even in this ninety-degree humidity.

They do not sing or drone. They hardly see.
Up to the tops of the waving grasses they come,

groping wildly in earth's dark house.
Some slip and fall to the ground,

begin again their blind ascent
towards the warm smell of passing heat.

*

It is August. A woman
walks along the tracks in early evening.
Three box cars lie on their sides
in the tarry grass. In June, the Burlington
sprawled across the embankment.
Now only these cars are left.
They will lie there all summer
drawing something into themselves.
She saw it at a distance,
a long line of shadows streaming
like cool air into the waiting box cars.
Take the shadows, then.
There are too many.
Take more. Take until you drain us.
In the fall they will come with cranes.

*

Johnson is hunting his hunting dogs.
He is hurt by their abundance,
and he cannot feed them: Queen, Cheyenne,
Jesse, Lady, and their unnamed brood.
He hunts their loose skins,
and he hunts their yellow eyes.
That is how he thinks of it —
one part at a time.

Johnson is hunting his hunting dogs.
He hunts the ticks in their coats
and the burrs in their haunches.
He would hunt the grace of their serving
if he thought it would ease his burden.
Johnson is covered with mill dust.
His beard is splattered with grains,
and his coat hangs loose from his shoulders.

Johnson is hunting his hunting dogs.
He shot one in trust and the others fled.
The dusk crouches at their crying.
The moon waits before rising.
These beasts have become too many,
and he has nothing to name them.
His children wait by the windows.
They bite each other's faces and arms.

*

I don't know what I see yet,
but I tell you it is there.
Something stretches out before us
as far as the eye can see.
It may be grass. It may be a body
of water. There is constant motion

as it gives off sparks.
Near us, this body of water
(near us, this plain of grass)
is indented, as though a giant thumb
had pressed its print there.
Wait. Something is taking shape.
It is a woman wearing an apron.
She pushes the hair from her forehead
with the back of her hand.
She has worked so hard.
I am trying to read her face.
Wait. I have lost sight of land.

TO A PENNY POSTCARD, © 1911

A woman's interested head, long sprigs of green,
and a loose, supple ribbon the blush
pink of the rose shaded by my apple tree
sashes it all.

What
do we live for,
if it is not
to make Life
less difficult
for one another.

Not one of the pharmacy cure-alls from its day:
they usually use the word "easy."

And who doesn't know many
who would answer the rhetorical query,
No, for me. Or no one else will.

Very pretty, the sprigs and the satin of the loopy bowknot
and the font where we find difficulty.
And rather intrepid, the look in the woman's eyes.
She probes the words at an angle;
her hair, full and clean, as if it could polish them.

She lived
but it's a long time since a penny.
I don't wonder how she lived.
We know that don't we?

Isn't life easier for us,
being sent this postcard
from a bygone mailbox
and a vanished heart —
yes, even extinct it makes life
less troublesome for me,
not quite lost each day. And pretty.

FOUR ANONYMOUS WOMEN WITH BRIGHT SAD MOUTHS

$7. Hand-colored. All wearing the same pendant.
Jade, jade, jade, and jade.
Filipinas? Malay? Silk and rayon
best clothes. Sisters. But it is
their bright red unhappy mouths I see first.
Bright unhappiness.

Ray's is an open barn with a radiating wood stove in its center. I bought the picture directly from big rough Ray, who bought it off someone else for how little? And he made what — $5 — from me. He saw something in it.

Layers of dust from the Gravenstein Highway.
A history of moisture
eating oyster crackers of paint off the frame.
But print fabrics still glad, and glad
their beautician-scrolled hair.
The formal photographer worked them
into a diamond conformation, they're its bright corners,
points of a family gem.

You cannot tell exactly what has been abandoned
by their identical rejectable mouths.
Words, curses, held in common by that quartet of expressions,
the red slots, penny arcade, parking meter, slot
machine, cat cry, ringworm,
red toy race track, mouths.

A woman dementia-convinced, in her wavery dimension, thinks she is abandoned, leans around the corner where her kind husband left her to save her long slow walking to the restaurant. She looks as forsaken as a wild clattering deer wandered onto asphalt. In some intersections no love intersects.

I used to watch the nudists in a Santa Barbara canyon
wave us — girls and students — off, want
their privacy yet want the sun,

that large a share of radiance.
I offered to be like the sun, that approving.
They taught me to learn
further plainness.

God wove the fabric of the beetle's skin.
Or someone else might think *forged* it.
The beetle god is a blacksmith
with a loom.

"Suffering must be anonymous" — half-caught narration to a film on Mexico. *Penitentes* in black cloth head-masks and robes, "Custom demands that suffering be anonymous."

The old nudists felt politically oppressed. The greatest original tango composer was persecuted for changing form. Who, really, wants to be remembered as the heavy hand against nudists and tangoists? As their tormentor? As someone who would wear them down, proscribe them?

Disillusionment.
Their mouths are an earlier stage of it.
It reaches greatness in tango.

The pessimistic and the disillusioned were much admired — one singer "famous for the line, 'The 20th Century is a trash heap. No one can deny it . . .' " — for giving a mouth to zero.

All suffering must be anonymous, the narrator said, and costumed.

We decide not to go near the cliff
this time, the most worn risked path,
children too go there,
field trips to the edge.
Looking on, the wild iris.
Then I remember the blindness of plants . . .

That's a rafflesia on her dress, the largest flower. I recall it from research on largest and smallest plants, caught in the middle as we are. Her gray suited sister, equal.

A flower, if you blink, from bowel to breast. Proportionally, imagine the lonely room, the abandoner's missing heart from ceiling to floor.

In the evening the mists drape . . .
just exist and nothing else does.
The strong earthline lifts
a full coastline of fog.
The harbor lights, in pecking order
or as if pets of light graduating
one by one from training school —
over the baylands
the harbor lights come on.
The egrets preview another pond.

Where else would rafflesia appear on daily wear? Fourteen species from Malaya & the East Indies, of which the enormous red- and cream-flowered Sumatran *R. arnoldii* is well known from models of it seen in museums. "Species are impossible to identify by their superficial resemblances, since it is the *structures inside the flowers* that distinguish them." Anonymity, but not inside.

All their mouths are open, teeth, worry, concern.

You think you know lifting.
The fog — too much for humans —
waterweight miles broad —
wet baggage, soaked work . . .
Everything wet begs. Oblige.
Give out of pocket, the purse of every cell.

In one antiques shop in the old superseded capital on the bay,
between refineries and mothball fleet,

tins of Elgin second hands —
what does it mean they didn't work
throughout the wars? lay still through peace?

Muteness is healing, they said, when I lost my voice.
Muteness keeps all concepts in solution,
casting out none.
Speech seems an outcast, a bit *stray*.

In Guerneville the slim men and large women without garments glowed fully in the sun around the pool. I walked down in the evening, slipped off my dress, swam with the shapes. My shape welcomed me. I'm still slow from an anesthetic. But I don't have to speak and make sense underwater. The women embrace in the pool. Tall old bay trees and redwoods watch the bathers wash away the persecution.

"I can hardly believe a nudist could ever attempt to take his or her life; it seems to me unthinkable — a nudist is an optimist to the extreme degree above everything else."

The women's lipstick hurts to see
but seems not punitive
toward the source of their care.
Under the magnifying glass I see
the forward sister's chained jade
is only painted on by the touch-up artist.
She has no ornament.

I picture them standing side by side in bathing suits, watching a river . . .

Note: The quote in the third stanza from the end derives from *Sunshine & Health*, June 1948.

HAVE YOU SEEN THIS CHILD

Eating breakfast you notice
your face on the milk carton
And how old you feel

for twelve

And how will anybody ever recognize you
now but clearly
the search was called off
long ago

Nobody's looking for you
anymore nobody cares

No one is expecting you

where other people are living
kindly
people who're younger
than you with a boy
of their own

Yes

He looks a little like you

He and his mother still share the same name though

While nobody knows yours
they don't even hear

when you knock
and the young mother opens the door looks

up and down the street with

worried glances
which take in all the stars before

she closes the door
You hear the lock click

and watch as she wanders from room
to room the lights go
one by
one out

out

SUNDAY AFTERNOON

My brother is deep in his library book. Which
is causing my stepfather great agitation: he keeps
appearing in the doorway and staring at the back
of his head.

What he'd like to do is drag him downstairs
to the basement for a tablesaw lesson.

He'd like to take him for a fear ride to the barber.

In the crib, left alone to her own weird devices,
my sister is spending her nap time engaged in a
babbling rehearsal of several recently acquired
terms of abuse and grotesquely penitential self-
loathing. And I,

I'm in the kitchen busy getting in my mother's
way.

At this moment she's basting something that looks
like a brain.

The rain continues falling. But then, it's always
falling. It is Sunday, somewhere

a bell keeps on tolling.

Somebody must have been born.

MY GREAT HAPPINESS

There where some people live
I've built my hut as well.
Wagons rumble by
and the horses whinny loudly.
If you ask me how it's possible
I don't shudder from the noise,
there's this: the world's far off
for the man who can live alone.

Often I pick asters by the fence
and look idly at
South Mountain, gone past blue
under the sky's canopy,
the slope gray in heavy fog,
the birds moving off
in the last evening glimmers
to their nests in quiet groves.

And if you ask me how it's possible
I'm so happy,
there's this: I'd scratch my head
in vain for the right word —
there isn't a human word
to get at the deepest sense of things.

translated by Stuart Friebert
and Harry Li Ling

RISE VS. RUN

Fallen roofer rise, I say, like some wigged Christ
to Lazarus, and, as the pieces of his pelvis knit back together,
remarkably, he does. And shows up at the clinic at five,
months later, packing a yard-long sturgeon fresh from
the Satsop, a thing I remember he swore he'd do. The fish
was weird science fiction: prehistoric, plated, battleship
gray; we butchered it on a piece of plywood in the alley
out back, tossing the majority, cartilaginous and streaky,
into the Foodliner dumpster next door. What was left,
he promised, was so delicious, that the ugly would be stricken
from my memory altogether.

The man will never stand truly
upright again. He gave me two short months from the time
he could drag to standing, and we did our best. He had a family,
a business, and no desire to fine-tune locomotion with me.
Still, now, if I'm driving home and spot his truck, I'll scan
the rooflines, looking for the silhouette and limp, curious to see
my signature there, to see the fruit of my labors on high, exalted,
cleated to a steep pitch, working side to side, stapling tabs,
gaining slowly, like a climber, on the crest.

I don't honk
if he's up there, for fear of startling him, for fear of triggering
another slip and shattering, long-storied fall. But I stopped once
when he was ground-level, calling him out, letting him cuss
my worthlessness, admiring his stupefying, tattoo-dimming tan.
I watched him stump down to his truck for his thermos and
smokes; he was helical, tapped like a screw; he has no rotation
in his hips, no toe-off, and curves out hard in front like a rooster
in a strutting bluff. His back will be arthritic by the time he's 40;
he shouldn't be able to walk, much less roof. Yet he laughs.
I laugh. Black squirrels fly, in furious arcs, through the manicured
yard around us. The whole thing is a complete mystery to me.

URGENCY

I stand her on her new pinned
hip, the day already a shambles,
and because I'm rushing, and have
neglected to ask her, she immediately,
because it is the law, has to pee. So
I roll over the commode, ease her
back down, wrap a loose sheet
around her middle and cinch her
tight to the chair, fixed upright,
knotted in, and step back out into
traffic and the litany of pages,
and sag in the jamb, blocked,
drumming, waiting for her call.
But
suspended there, minutes ticking,
my breathing deepens, and my mind
begins its slow overland bounding
toward you, like the doe we caught,
years ago, in our headlights
on Orcas, coiling and lifting into
the elegant, dreamlike arc of her
leap, its phosphorous tracing,
the clutterdown fence falling,
falling slowly away, her skying
eye a black, glancing
jewel.
She stayed
in the sky then, like a Chagall
as I recall, the two of us rough,
green and smiling, a wash of stars
and bony, blue-coated fiddler
stirred in. I would go a long way
to feel like that again, tingling,
struck like a bell, transported,
briefly, somewhere beyond

speech, beyond caring
about speech. It's a need
that brims still, that builds,
pressing, for months sometimes,
because we have dressed up and
gone to work, phones bristling
in our ears, and forgotten why
exactly it is we live.

STRONGER

I've got a tractor grip on his pelvis
and block his knees with mine, so that
when I arch backwards, teeter-totter-like,
he's levered up smoothly, in a slow reciprocal rise,
and his legs made, for one brief moment, to again
bear weight, the attendant shakes speaking briefly,
eloquently, of the distance we have yet to travel
before those legs will be strong enough to bring him,
back extending, without collapse or bracing,
on the glimmer of an impulse, up again to vertical.

Yesterday, at Staircase, Lisa and I had reached
the far point of our excursion, when the ceiling
parted unexpectedly, and the old growth, sun-shot,
lit up in swaths and diagonals, and the canopy flared
into song. We sunned a half hour on some flat
riverside boulders, grazed through our apples
and cheese, then stripped and waded, waist-deep
into the Skokomish, our feet braced hard against
the river rock and the casual, steely, god-like
power of the current. That morning, we had locked

the doors against our own kids and made rare,
wakening love, working at it, digging deep,
our attack and timing effortlessly, speechlessly,
in synch. Now, easing this brain-injured patient
back to his chair, I remember how the Skokomish,
in 20 seconds, had numbed us, sapped the spring
from our legs, scissoring around our bellies,
our straining thighs, our rawness. We could not

move forward even an inch against it, and eventually
dragged ourselves back out and sprawled exhausted,
exhilarated, a fingerwidth away from the twisting surge,
and slept.

ACOLYTES: SERVING 6:30 MASS

We've lit the nave from the breakers, and all the tall
altar candles, and slouch panda-like, black and white,
in our cassocks and surplices, waiting for our man,
Fr. Hanzo, the berator, the prick, the invariably-hung-over

to show. And when he does shuffle in, sour-smelling,
hack-shaven, we circle and vest him, cincture and alb,
while he stands like Christ crucified, eyes rolled back,
arms out, half-conscious, rocking. We ring the bells,

we march, we get through it. And filing back in, we
flatten ourselves against the sacristy wall, and he sweeps by
and does not bless us, staggering straight for his coffee
and Luckies, and yesterday's racing results. Fuck him

we say out loud in the hall to the next crew, nodding.
Fuck *him* we say genuinely, heatedly, again and again,
until laughter finally shoulders in, blunts us, and we rehang
our vestments mimicking him, perfecting, by turns, the lisp

and scowls of the pillar of Fairview, the confessor
of widows, the place-loser, the dimwit, the one who
convinces us finally, viscerally, that the road to sainthood
is far too tortured, lined as it is with figures we cannot help

but despise. We cross Lorain, still a river of headlights,
to AmyJoy Donuts, every blurted, every short, mangled phrase
of Mass Latin sending us now into stratospheric, helpless,
asphyxiating spasms of laughter. We stake out a table

among the black-fingered machinists from Ford, who
come here every morning on their way home from graveyard
to read *Plain Dealers* and translate things the hard-blonde
waitresses say into Polish. We figure maybe they are

the saints, waiting for their curlered wives to clear out
the house, the night's shower of metal shavings still
embedded in their arms and heads, glittering like tinseled trees
when they raise up their cups, consecration-like, to signal

the slouching clutch of waitresses, sharing a quick smoke
at the end of the burnt, hatcheted counter, One more.

MYSTERIOSO

If you jiggle the book of Russian icons
the cloth on God's knees shimmers like the suit
Thelonious Monk wears in *Straight No Chaser* —
sharkskin shifting as he leans into the keys
picking up shadow and light—almost grooved

like those old Cracker Jack cards giving us
two scenes we could jiggle back and forth:
a boy's smile flipping into a scowl, the world
notched and mutable — or in another light
a child might assume whatever was playing

on a person's face, there was an opposite
lurking behind. And that's just how it is,
my friend would say, we're both sides of the coin,
head and tail pressed, the way in the movie,
Monk rasps a few unintelligible words,

then sits down to his bright clear riffs, their jab
and dodge against the dark — without which,
my friend insists, what's light? It's how
the mystics argue too: the soul just a rumor,
expensive perfume sealed in a flask,

until it's broken. This same friend once felt
her life wasn't worth two bits. She downed
a bottle of pills, then walked, hoping to drop
unknown, no wallet, just a stiff in the morgue.
But God must have had different plans —

otherwise, she can't explain how the spare change
in her pocket, embossed head on a coin
under her thumb, made her feel her daughter's
real face, swollen by grief. It got her to a cop.
Doctors emptied her out — years of loathing,

finally gone. And the world came back
pure gift. She told me this when I was stuck
in a hard-luck story of my own, same side
coming up no matter how I flipped: loss
still loss, heartbreak still hoarding itself,

playing its rot-gut tunes no matter what
buttons I pushed. Which is why I love Monk,
who makes of the past such variations
in the confession booth of my car,
it's as if a tune's not a tune until it's stretched

more ways than you'd think it could go
without snapping. And when he snaps it,
what can you do but say *yes* to all those
discords and delays, those runs and aversions
you had to be hurt into hearing?

MONKEY HOUSE

Such a howl went up when I walked in,
big lippy kisses and hoots so loud
I couldn't help but turn. Then as I stepped away,
wails, head clobbering. We did that
over and over — kiss-kiss and head-conk —
barely noticing the crowd. I never saw
such hairy grief, big knuckled loneliness
scraping the floor. *Closer*,

he waved, *closer* — just the opposite
of my humanoid family, those dreary
worriers, who'd like to zap out of the genes
any feeling that can't sit like a lady,
keep its elbows off the table. Stuff it back in
and stay calm, they insist, or we'll all be
hurled down dark eons, back into furry faces
and curled toes, shitting on floors.

I was pacing in front of the cage,
a one person house of hysterics. Other visitors
carefully tip-toed around. The chimp lay
on his back, picked his toes, pursed his great
flexible lips, and I was about to say: my people
didn't use words, they did it with eyebrows, tiny
sucked-in breaths, obsessive as painting on grains
of rice with brushes made from one split hair —

but then I looked up at his body, its furry
smarts, the way whatever he did he did
completely, reaching an arm behind his head
to get to his chin, fizzing his face up
like a seltzer bottle. "You feel what you feel,"
I said, and he rolled his eyes, looking
everywhere but at me, as if to say,
"Interview over. You got what you came for."

And then he seemed to slump, heavy
as though a grief too big to thump or shriek
had dropped down on his shoulders, a sorrow
cut deep over what's become of his kind.
I put my palms to the glass where his had been,
as if I could feel the rough pads of his fingers,
a trace of those instincts meant for a whole jungle
now crammed into one very small house.

REDBUD

I had to step outside, having just finished
the letters of Keats, who for all his talk of easeful death,
told his friend Brown he wanted to live, wanted his *feeling*
for light and shade, his memories of walking with her —
everything reminds him. *Oh God! God! God!* —
he was barely able to write it, *I should have had her*
when I was in health. Does that mean what it sounds like to us?
Window light and leaf shade on the porch. Next door,
people slipping into their coats, leaving a party. *See ya, Take it*
easy.
Hard to believe just last week, I looked up to see a blue truck
crest the hill, flying it seemed, and the driver's surprised eyes
as he fishtailed into me. Barely time to ask, *Am I going to die?*
But nobody did, so can I say it was worth it? say that *beauty*
totaled my car — the stand of redbuds I'd gone to see, purple
blossoms
on rain-slick limbs, stark as petals on a painted scroll blooming
above waterfalls, above tiny figures on a foot bridge crossing
a steep gorge. There we were, waiting for a trooper in that fel-
low's cab,
and it seemed he had to tell how he got caught cheating his boss
at the stables, how he was planning to leave a whole mess
of bad credit, racing stubs, a woman who finally said, *Get out*.
Beauty must have been a kind of charm he knew how to use,
aqua eyes, easy smile, the way he could tell his scam and still
run it,
share a thermos, ask ideas for his new name. All around us,
those redbuds
so stunning I can't remember now if he drugged a horse,
or fixed a race, dealt off the bottom with his fine jittery hands.
I had Keats in my pocket, himself worried about money,
walking through Scotland to see its waterfalls, astonished
by what he hadn't imagined, the subtleties of tone — moss,
rock-weed —

I live in the eye he says to his brother. But they're gone —
Keats, Fanny, Tom, everyone he wrote those exuberant letters to.
What good is *beauty*? Still I saw it, those redbuds, like the mo-
ment
making love, into the rush of it, when you think, *I could die now.*
After which — the truck, that fellow telling the trooper flat out
he was doing 50 in a 25 — as if beauty has to press its luck,
which the insurance company said had run out:
we'll get him, don't you worry. I don't. Because he's gone,
among the tossing heads of horses, their nervous sidesteps —
gone,
without a name, like those tiny figures dissolving in paint.
Imagine, standing over a gorge where a waterfall plummets —
lost,
not so much in thought as its graceful absence, so lost
there is nothing else to want from the world The *world.*
How beautiful the word sounds. *Whorled.* Purple blossoms
on rain-black trees. The enormous eyes of horses. Rock-weed,
slate.
The world loving us, who probably have never loved enough,
never dared let ourselves go that far into its beauty.

HIDE&SEEK

I've been rounding up my dead family
this summer, putting on some miles
crisscrossing the torpid midwest,
armed with platt maps and topo maps
drawn with the fine hairs of the unpaved
country roads the dead in my family
always seemed to choose as their way
underground. Funny how even though
they weren't, for the most part,
terribly ambitious — some were drunks,
some shiftless, or crooked, some merely
drifted like most of us through
the mortal, comforting rhythm
of the days — they all managed this
difficult trick of climbing down
into a box six feet under, and pulling
a quarter ton of marble over their heads,
like insects on TV that one day
realize it's absolutely imperative
that they find a big spider,
paralyze it, fill it with their eggs
and bury it. And all these good folks,
known to me mostly as ghosts looking up
like rare animals from the snares
of old snapshots, put everything
aside one day and dived into a burrow.
To think of my straitlaced grandmother
holed up down there like a badger!
Hiding with the rest of them, under Ohio
and Missouri and Illinois, while mosquitoes
are eating me alive; I've been hunting
all day for a great-grandfather
who's tangled up in the roots
of somebody's farm. Probably he's a tree
or something by now, but I want to find

his name scratched on the ground; somehow
that makes me less nervous about the way
he wandered out in the huge darkness
along with the rest of the family
and hid from me, and kept on hiding
although I've long since stopped counting.

SUMMER, SANTA CRUZ: READING UPDIKE

You're dead center
in the day, in the middle
of a sentence, of the right word
for the middle of summer,
the ocean knocking in the bay
a half-mile down the road,
iced tea sweating on the table,
and it took an ant
with a mind smaller than a comma
climbing your bare shin
to make you look up and see
what you had dreamed of
all through the dark, ineffable
midwestern winter.

A mockingbird on the fence
says its name again and again.
The fence is redwood, the deck is redwood.
A eucalyptus and a scrub oak
are twisting woodenly out of the earth,
a torsion so extreme
it cracks their bark.
And that little fleck
of metal, so high and fine
it's lost in the blind spot
at the crosshairs of your gaze,
isn't making a sound: a jetliner
refined by distance and the sky's
astringency to a mute sparkle,
an idea, like loss
gelded by time.

Even if there is a sound
the sea's subliminal tape hiss
and the oriental wind chime, clonging

dully from the eaves
when the dozing animal of the air
rolls over against its bars,
have it covered.

RIDING WESTWARD

I was looking through the sky-blue
head of Christ last month
as he watched me down there
on the gloomy floor. And now

I'm looking through a beer,
gold in a glass at Tina's
Mexican Restaurant, somewhere
in Nevada. It's the Boutique
Fantastique across the street
that brought Chartres to mind.

Divergent impulses, but both towns
(this one's called Pioche)
have their plusses. And the beef tacos,
after my long day in the saddle
of a Yamaha 1100, in the hot
blue gust of August, are marvels.

Not far from here the Virgin
herself showed up on a tortilla shell.
People came from all over the country
hoping to be cured. Some
may have come from France, like
Charles Peguy, who walked from Paris
to Chartres to pray for his ailing son.

She's appeared the last couple of years
on a refrigerator in New Mexico,
on the side of a rusting grain silo
in Kansas, and on the hood
of an '89 Camaro in Dayton, Ohio,
after it had been carefully waxed.

Everywhere there were long lines
of those waiting to be cured. People
lined up is a sign of civilization,

I realize, as the waitress comes with
another Tecate. My third. She is very good,
and the cook is very good. So
is the mockingbird, a gray wraith
outside the window, somehow sketching in
the whole parched scene in one
off-key note.

It is a fowl of the air.

Now I notice the clouds piling up
immensely at the edge of the firmament.

Here's to them
and to the mockingbird who reminds me,
for some reason, of my ex-girlfriend
who only appears when I'm a little drunk.

Here's to Christ with his head full of heaven.

YELLOW VISION

She is each of their unaware subjects,
slumped in the corner of some night cafe,
her face, hair, the velvet choker at her throat,
all cast in a yellowing
limelight. It is France, the close
of the nineteenth century. Painters
and haystacks. And the wormwood toxin
that poisons her vision, magnifies theirs,
each brain temporarily stained
by a terpene sheen. Xanthopsia, it is called —
yellow vision — too much absinthe, thick
in its fluted cup, and the world, the palette
and proprietor's apron, the lakes and cypresses:
yellow, golden, apple green.

She is subject. They are painters, sipping
absinthe, until canvas after canvas
gilds to a sickly chill. All the wheat fields,
all the lank burlesque, oddly slanted, raw.
And now she is walking down the fallow roadway.
In the opening light, steam
slides from the cows and rooftops, from
the wormwood blossoms pale on the hillside.
Her room smells of milk, then an oiled wool. And why
would they lend to the harvests and dance halls

this gloss of misgiving? Why would they court
these distortions of light, cup after cup, until
the hue-thickened visible spectrum
shrivels to yellow?
On the table her daughter's wooden doll
rests in a mane of cornsilk hair, the strands
withered dark and matted. Soon she will draw
from a thick husk a handful of silk, then repin
new hair for the fresh day. Brilliant,

it will cling to her skin like the opening hour,
through she flicks her hands, shaking
the slender strands. Still some will cling,
earth-cool and brilliant. And will not
take their moment from her
for all of her shaking.

ALTAMIRA: WHAT SHE REMEMBERED

That, chased by a covey of hunters, the fox
slipped into its den
exactly as bread slipped into her father's mouth:
white with a tapering backstroke of brown.

That the hunters at the den door
chopped and chopped with their black heels.

That the cave they revealed, child-sized but
humid with promise, ticked
with a placid rain, as if the weather
of the sky were the weather of the earth.

That she saw on the cave walls, in blue-black
and ochre, "the bulls," although they were bison,
she learned, and a dipping hind.

That the borders of her body were the borders
of the weather.

That whatever awakened within her there —
not grief, not fear — had the sound
of hooves down a cobbled street.

That they lifted her back by one arm.

That, as she walked with her father
through the downland, the sound of the hooves
settled.

That whatever awakened within her there
had the sound of birds
flushed from the downland grasses.

Had the sound of leaves from a pitchfork' s tines .

Years later, had the ticking sound of the rain.

THE SUICIDE OF CLOVER ADAMS: 1885

All the bodies like fallen cattle.
And the snubbed-brimmed caps. The war. Civil.
Brady's shadow, at times, rinses a photograph
with its black pond. But the image I keep

is a blasted meadow. Burdock, bloated sacs
of lungwort. And up from the earth's fresh trough,
I think, the mineral scent of ripped grasses.

Henry slumps in the grip of a toothache.

If I were real, I would help him. But I
am the fabric of well-water — slick and transparent —
my voice a bird where my shoulder should be.

In the Doctrine of Signatures, each plant
cures the body it mimics.
So the liver-shaped leaves of hepatica
temper the liver's jaundice, and snuff
from the snapdragon's tapered neckline
heals the tubular body of the human throat.

Heart leaf. Toothwort.

Steam from the kettle
has cast a late dew on the ladles.
And a privacy to each of the windows.
In print after print, Brady centered the men
facing east. The sandbags and cannons.
One midday, I centered our cousins with an eastward
glance, fresh for the incoming hour.
In the darkroom musk, they
rose through potassium baths
with the langorous ripples of flounders . . .

Steam. Its simmering mist.
If I were real, I would offer a flower. But I

have taken a body of water, stirred
through with cyanide salts. Slick and transparent,
they stroke their signature to the echoing self.
Which is nothing. And from which
nothing rises at all.

LINDA BIERDS is the recent recipient of grants from the Guggenheim Foundation (1995) and the NEA (1996). The poems in this issue are all from a new manuscript, **The Profile Makers**. She teaches in the writing program at the University of Washington.

GEORGE BILGERE's first collection, **The Going**, was published in 1994 by the University of Missouri Press. He was on leave from John Carroll University last year, traveling in Spain, France and England while working on a second book.

The poems by MARIANNE BORUCH in this issue are from her new manuscript, **A Stick that Breaks and Breaks**, which Oberlin College Press plans to publish next year in the *FIELD* Poetry Series. She teaches at Purdue University.

RALPH BURNS's new collection, **Swamp Candles**, won the Iowa Poetry Prize and appeared from Iowa this spring. He teaches at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

MARTHA COLLINS's most recent book of poems is **A History of Small Life on a Windy Planet**, published by Georgia in 1993. A book of translations form the Vietnamese of Nguyen Quang Thieu, co-translated with the author, will be out next spring.

MICHELE GLAZER, a frequent contributor, works in the Oregon Field Office of the Nature Conservancy.

MIROSLAV HOLUB's new book, **Intensive Care: Selected and New Poems**, is just out in the *FIELD* Translation Series. A new collection of his essays, **From the Amoeba to the Philosopher**, will appear next year from Milkweed Press.

TIM KELLY writes: "Poet, physical therapist, displaced Ohioan, 15 year resident of Olympia, Washington. Current ms. **Stronger** looking for a home. First book, **Articulation**, still available from Lynx House Press. I strongly endorse bodies."

SANDRA MCPHERSON's two new books, **Edge Effect: Trails and Portrayals** and **The Spaces Between Birds: Mother/Daughter Poems 1967-1995**, both appeared from Wesleyan earlier this year. She teaches at the University of California at Davis.

DZVINIA ORLOVSKY's first full-length collection, **A Handful of Bees**, was published in 1994 by Carnegie Mellon University Press.

STANLEY PLUMLY's new collection of poems, **The Marriage in the Trees**, will appear from Ecco Press early in 1997.

BETSY SHOLL's most recent book is **The Red Line**, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992.

CHARLES SIMIC is well-known to our readers. His newest book of poems, **Walking the Black Cat**, will appear this fall from Harcourt Brace.

TAO YUANMING (365-427) was one of China's first great poets. He retired early to write the personal, intimate poems for which he is known and loved, celebrating rural existence, the contentments of a simple life, and the pleasures of friendship, conviviality, and wine. The co-translator, HARRY LI LING, is a Chinese journalist who now makes his home in Europe.

ELIZABETH TROTTER has published poems in a number of journals. She lives on an island in the Puget Sound, but notes that she has lived most of her adult life in the Midwest.

NANCY WILLARD's new book, **Swimming Lessons: New and Selected Poems**, is due out this fall from Knopf.

FRANZ WRIGHT is a recent recipient of the PEN/Voelcker Award. His work is represented in **The Book of Luminous Things**, an anthology edited by Czeslaw Milosz. He lives in Everett, Massachusetts.

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Angel Weather Vane, c. 1890, artist unknown. Polychromed wood, 27 × 10". New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown.